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England's Last Medieval Heresy Hunt: Gloucestershire 1540

On 28 July 1539, Henry VIII formally assented to the election of Dr. John Bell as bishop of Worcester.¹ For much of the previous half-century, the bishopric of Worcester had been a sinecure, bestowed on the Italians who served as the Tudor regime's representatives at the papal court, men such as Cardinal Geronimo de Ghinucci. But in 1539 Tudor England no longer recognised the papacy, and the bishopric of Worcester was anything but a sinecure. The newly appointed bishop Bell was required not merely to be a teacher, pastor and administrator, but a counter-revolutionary. He was successor to an episcopal regime under which he had served, but which he had regarded as profoundly wrong, and he set himself to dismantle its effects. He set about his counter-revolutionary project with considerable verve, but it was a short-lived programme. In 1541, half his territory was taken away from him when the new diocese of Gloucester was created. Gloucestershire was the part of his diocese which Bell had known best, and where the counter-revolutionary task was most urgent. A little more than two years later, in November 1543, Bell resigned as bishop and retired, a choice which no other Tudor bishop emulated.² He was succeeded as bishop by Nicholas Heath, a political trimmer, a man with no wish to rock any boats and whose reward for this was eventual appointment as archbishop of York. Bell's counter-revolutionary programme had failed.

It was short-lived, but it was eye-catching while it lasted. The centrepiece of it was a drive against religious dissidents in Gloucestershire. This campaign is detailed in a splendid and, for the period, unique visitation book, now in Worcestershire County Record Office. This book is well known to scholars of the period and of the locality. In 1971 K. G. Powell described most of the evidence recorded in it, and it has since been revisited by other scholars, most recently Caroline Litzenberger in her valuable survey of mid-Tudor Gloucestershire.³ This article attempts to put Bell's counter-revolution, in particular the

details revealed in the visitation book, into context: the context of the national religious politics of the time, and also the long context of religious dissidence during the late medieval period and the methods which the Church had developed for dealing with it. The article suggests that what happened in Gloucestershire under Bishop Bell is of more than local importance. Bell's activities reveal something of the scale and the nature of the revolutionary, evangelical achievement in mid-Tudor England; they also help us to assess the plausibility of the counter-revolutionary project. Moreover, they can tell us something about the passing of the Middle Ages; for it seems that what Bell was doing was something very medieval, and no-one was to attempt anything quite like it again.

Bell's inheritance as bishop in 1539 is vital to understanding his activities. Henry VIII's Reformation had made a bigger splash in the diocese of Worcester than almost anywhere else in England and Wales. This was partly because of the presence on the edge of the diocese of the city of Bristol – or rather, of most of the city. We first hear of evangelicals⁴ in Bristol in 1528, when the travelling evangelical preacher and bookseller Thomas Garrett was arrested in Bedminster after a nationwide manhunt. The evangelical bookseller Richard Webbe, apprehended soon after Garrett, also admitted to plying his wares in Bristol.⁵ We also start to find men of Gloucestershire origin showing up amongst known evangelicals. Most famous, of course, was William Tyndale, the Biblical translator, but there is also James Bainham, from a Forest of Dean family, executed in London in 1532.⁶ These martyrs may not have learned their evangelicalism at home – although there may have been some early influences. Soon after, however, undoubted Gloucestershire converts began to show up. Two early wills from the county betrayed evangelical sentiments: those of Thomas Brown, a Bristolian who died in 1531, and more spectacularly and more famously, of William Tracy, a gentleman from Toddington in the centre of the county who died in 1530. Tracy, who was a cousin or an uncle of the evangelical martyr James Bainham, left a document which was not

so much a will as a polemical religious manifesto, spelling out his commitment to the evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone in uncompromising detail. It had the unique result that he was condemned posthumously as a heretic on the basis of his own will, and his body exhumed and burned. The decision to take this last step was made by the chancellor of the diocese, none other than John Bell, who would later be bishop, and he had overstepped the mark. Tracy's son Richard vigorously contested the case and in particular the burning, an act for which Bell had lacked the necessary legal writ. Tracy succeeded in having Bell fined and, in the process, caught the attention of the clique of evangelicals which Henry VIII was now permitting to gather at his court.⁷

From a Gloucestershire point of view, or perhaps from any point of view, the most significant of those court evangelicals was Hugh Latimer. Latimer was a Cambridge-trained and converted evangelical, who from 1530 was beginning to attract royal patronage. In 1531, he was given the living of West Kington, on the Gloucestershire-Wiltshire border. In 1532 he met and counselled James Bainham when he was in prison. And in 1533, he was invited to preach in Bristol by the mayor, who was presumably trying to curry favour at court. Latimer's preaching in Bristol caused uproar – but then, as one conservative cleric sourly observed, 'his teaching moveth no little dissension among the people wheresoever he cometh'.⁸ He was unmistakably one of the most gifted preachers of the century. An eyewitness account of his visit to Exeter the following summer describes how, during an open-air sermon, a sudden Devon cloudburst struck, but Latimer raised his voice and continued preaching, and the crowd, spellbound, stood and continued to listen ('some for the good lykinge of the eloquens of the man, some for the noveltie of the doctryne') until Latimer exerted himself to the point of suffering a nosebleed in the pulpit. His next sermon, indoors, drew such crowds that the church was filled and further people were gathered outside to hear what they could through the open windows.⁹ In Bristol, he stirred up a hornet's nest of

support and opposition; he converted one of his principal opponents, the Dominican prior John Hilsey; and he was opposed by another gifted and animated preacher, William Hubberdine. Latimer's ability to stir up trouble with his eloquent heresies was becoming proverbial. It was, therefore, something of a shock to religious conservatives in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire when he was appointed Bishop of Worcester in 1535.

Latimer was the most outspoken evangelical activist appointed to the episcopal bench by Henry VIII, but his impact on the diocese of Worcester was probably not so great as we might expect. He clearly took his new responsibilities seriously, but he was too involved in national religious politics to spend as much time in his diocese as he would doubtless have liked. Moreover, he was only bishop for four years. However, during that time he and his protégés did a great deal to dismantle the structure of the medieval church in the diocese. In 1537, he issued a set of Injunctions to his clergy, requiring them to buy the Bible in English for themselves and to set out to study it systematically – this only a year after the English Bible had been legalised. Clergy were to require their parishioners to learn the basic English texts, the Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer – texts which every adult knew in Latin, but which were a novelty in English; yet Latimer's instructions were that those who could not recite the English versions were to be barred from communion. He singled out chantry priests, those whose primary responsibility was to say mass for the souls of the dead, a job which evangelicals such as Latimer believed was not merely pointless but actually blasphemous. Such priests were now to turn themselves into schoolteachers, in keeping with the evangelical emphasis on education: Latimer did not have the authority to ban them from saying mass for the dead, but he could certainly reorder their priorities. Likewise, he ordered that

no parson, vicar, curate nor chantry priest from henceforth do discourage any lay person from the reading of any good books either in Latin or English, but rather animate and encourage them unto such things.

There was little doubt that Latimer's definition of 'good books' included texts which would have been treated as heretical only months earlier.¹⁰

This was not simply a case of the bishop issuing instructions. He used the bishop's considerable powers of patronage to promote those who shared his views. Moreover, his men were on the ground making things happen. One of his most reliable enforcers was Richard Tracy, the son of the Toddington man who had been burned posthumously; from 1537 Tracy was a JP in Worcestershire. When a man from Norton, near Gloucester, was arrested in the same year for insulting Latimer, Hilsey and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, Tracy led the investigation, had the man imprisoned, pursued a cleric whom he suspected of spreading such views, and sent detailed reports on the whole case to Thomas Cromwell in London.¹¹ Tracy was also involved in the centrepiece of this phase of the Reformation, the dissolution of the monasteries. Under Latimer's stewardship, this was a purge of religious error as well as a transfer of property to the Crown. Tracy played a leading role in the dissolution of two of Gloucestershire's finest houses, the abbeys of Winchcombe and of Hailes, both near his own seat at Toddington. The religious debates in Winchcombe were lively. The curate, Anthony Sawnders, had been licensed to preach by Latimer and was clearly evangelical, while the abbey was resolutely conservative. In 1539 the abbey's cellarer was allegedly teaching songs denouncing the king to anyone who would listen. Tracy benefited personally from the abbey's destruction, while it was said that 'euerye Riche man of the towne of winchelcombe' was worse off.¹² Hailes Abbey was the home of one of the most famous and lucrative relics in medieval England, the blood of Hailes. Tracy and Latimer in person broke the relic open and inspected it; it was then taken to London, where John Hilsey, the Bristol friar whom Latimer

had converted and who was now Bishop of Rochester, displayed it from the pulpit at Paul's Cross and denounced it as a fake. Tracy also denounced the abbot of Hailes for his obstruction and cupidity, warning that some of the sheriff's men had also been corrupted. He later led an investigation into the plundering of the abbey by local people. It has recently been pointed out that this plunder weakened traditional religion in the county, but the hostility of Tracy and other officials to the perpetrators also emphasises the isolation of Latimer's evangelical clique. As Latimer admitted, he needed more men with Tracy's zeal.¹³

Latimer's departure from his bishopric was as stormy as his tenure of it. In the spring of 1539, the king introduced a bill to Parliament which drew certain limits to the process of reformation, stating six key principles of the old religion which he would not abandon. This bill, which eventually issued in the so-called Act of Six Articles, was an odd piece of legislation, probably better understood as a part of Henry VIII's struggle to get out of a distinctly uncomfortable international situation than as a serious attempt to settle the religious question in England.¹⁴ But there was no doubting that it was a blow to the evangelical cause, and two bishops lost their posts over it, Latimer and Nicholas Shaxton of Salisbury. The circumstances of their resignations are murky, and it is difficult to piece together quite what happened. We know that they opposed some of the six clauses in parliamentary committee, but accepted others.¹⁵ Presumably, they voted against the bill at its final reading in the Lords. It may, however, be misleading to link the two cases. Shaxton was an ill-tempered individual who made a grouchy attempt to negotiate his departure from office; he appears to have believed that it could be kept secret and that he could continue to be treated with episcopal dignity. In the event, he was placed under house arrest in Somerset and remained there for at least six months, being put under pressure to subscribe to the Act.¹⁶ Latimer was much less obviously reluctant about his resignation. Apparently he saw the Six Articles as a more dramatic turning point than Shaxton did. While Shaxton tried to do a deal with the regime,

Latimer tried to flee the country: he was arrested at Gravesend, and he too was imprisoned. Yet his period of confinement was much shorter, and he was in London participating in public affairs within a few months. And it was later said that when ‘he first put of his Rochet in his chamber among his frendes, sodenly he gaue askip in ye floore for ioy, feling his shoulders so light, and being discharged (as he sayd) of such an heauy burden’.¹⁷ Perhaps this was putting a brave face on things, although we may believe he would have found it burdensome to be a bishop in a church which was rejecting his beliefs. And it is noteworthy that when Latimer had the opportunity to take up his post again in the reign of Edward VI he refused to do so, preferring to have the freedom of a mere preacher.

So when John Bell became bishop of Worcester shortly after Latimer’s resignation, he inherited a diocese that had been under the most radical Protestant influence of any in England for four years. However, he also inherited one whose history of religious dissidence stretched back further than that. The city of Bristol and surrounding areas had been centres of the English heresy of Lollardy for a century and a half.¹⁸ Bristol had been a centre of Lollard preaching in John Wyclif’s lifetime and had remained so ever since. It was attractive to heretics partly because it was a border town: the Avon formed the boundary the dioceses of Worcester and of Bath and Wells. This rendered dissent in the city difficult to control, since inter-diocesan co-ordination in heresy hunting was very rare. Plenty of heresy cases crop up deeper in Gloucestershire itself. William Tyndale may have had Lollard connections, a long-running argument which seems unlikely to be solved soon.¹⁹ However, ‘Lollard’ is a slippery term. As has recently been pointed out by Andrew Larsen, there is a tendency to apply the label ‘Lollard’ indiscriminately to all English people accused of heresy between the 1370s and the 1520s, and this is probably misleading.²⁰ Many, perhaps most of these people really were Lollards. That is, they adhered to a broad tradition which owed something to the preaching of John Wyclif, and whose key points were the advocacy of the Bible in the

vernacular, and a robust scepticism towards the ceremonial of the established church, often extending to a denial that any objects, spaces or people could be sacred in any sense. This could and frequently did lead to a vigorous rejection of the veneration of saints, a willingness to disparage or even destroy images, and open contempt for the sacraments. It did not extend to questioning of basic Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the Incarnation or the Creation.

However, some late medieval heretics did question such basic doctrines: anti-heresy drives swept up people whose remarks did not betray a coherent heretical critique, but rather scoffing, incredulity, rationalism or mere bloodymindedness. As Larsen has pointed out, such basic ‘heresies’ cropped up periodically before Wyclif’s time, and persisted after him; it is perverse to classify them as ‘Lollard’ or indeed as anything. They are sufficiently simple that they are capable of being invented anew in every generation. Moreover, this blunt incredulity had a more sophisticated counterpart, when those with a little learning might use it to inform a cheery and idiosyncratic scepticism towards established doctrines. William Tracy apparently had a history of such religious questioning: this, at least, is the implication of his old friend William Tyndale’s claim that as early as 1510 Tracy had had a better understanding of St. Augustine than any doctor of theology in England.²¹ That is hardly a description of a Lollard, but rather of a self-taught man without too much respect for the boundaries of orthodoxy.

When John Bell took up office in Worcester, therefore, he was facing three different but interrelated kinds of religious dissidence in his diocese. First, the very long-term and low-level problem of straightforward scoffing and scepticism. Second, but perhaps drawing on that first tradition, the well-established problem of more organised, but not much more organised, Lollard dissidence. And third, the evangelical heresies which his predecessor had promoted so vigorously: a new and urgent problem, although one which was congruent with Lollard dissidence in many ways. Although all three problems bled into one another –

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Bell may not have differentiated the three difficulties in his mind in quite this way, but it is plausible that he did have some such mental scheme, because he did not come to this problem as a neophyte. One of the things which made him an obvious choice to be Latimer’s successor was his unparalleled familiarity with the diocese and its religious radicals. He had been archdeacon of Gloucester, and vicar-general and chancellor of the diocese since 1518, and during the era of the absentee Italian bishops he had effectively managed the diocese on their behalf.²³ He had lost the chancellorship in 1532, perhaps following the Tracy case, but he was replaced by a close ally, Thomas Bagarde, who would be his right-hand-man when he became bishop.²⁴ Two more allies were brothers, both named Thomas Bell, perhaps relatives of John. One Thomas Bell was recorder of Gloucester; the other, the more aggressive, was twice mayor of Gloucester and once sheriff of the county. During the 1530s this group fought a ferocious rearguard action against Latimer’s innovations. In 1536, Mayor Thomas Bell headed a serious attack on Latimer. This centred on James Ashe, the parson of Staunton, whom Latimer had licensed as a preacher. Six witnesses accused Ashe of preaching ‘that if

the king our soueraign Lorde dyd not go furth wyth his lawes, as he be gon, he wold call the king Antecryste'. Sheriff Bell worked hard to exacerbate this situation. He sent the details to the conservative bishop of London and to the duke of Norfolk, arguing that it was not only Ashe who should be disciplined: 'the Busshop of Worcester doth not well to admit maynteyne & suffere suche a light lerned man to *preche*.' Latimer had also, he noted disapprovingly, given a preacher's licence to a Dominican friar whom Archdeacon John Bell had banished from the diocese 'for his abhominable lyving and dayly vsage of drunkennes'.²⁵ Nothing came of this case, but the Bells' open antipathy to their bishop continued. During the winter of 1536-7 Mayor Bell was repeatedly heard to describe Latimer as a 'horsesone heretycke', and boasted that his appeal to the duke of Norfolk had so 'trymmyd' the bishop's ambitions that 'none of his chaplens durst yn *maner* come to *Glocester*'. Latimer's allies agreed that Mayor Bell was a 'rynge leder' of those who were oppressing the 'the true prechers of godes worde'. Archdeacon Bell was openly supporting him.²⁶ When one of Latimer's protégés, Hugh Rawlings, slipped through the net, the Bells mobilised against him. Rawlings was appointed as parson of Holy Trinity, Gloucester. A stream of complaints against him followed, which he claimed were malicious and co-ordinated by Mayor Bell; Latimer evidently believed him, because aside from one brief suspension he was left in post.²⁷

John Bell's qualifications for the bishop's bench were not purely local, however. He had made something of a mark on national religious politics too. He had first been recognised by Henry VIII because, like so many ambitious clerics, he had made it his business to be noisily in favour of the king's proposed divorce from Katherine of Aragon. He was one of those who had extracted a formal decision on the divorce in the king's favour from Oxford University, and was proctor for the king when the marriage was formally annulled in 1533. His reward for these efforts was a place as a royal chaplain.²⁸ But like so many others, his advocacy of the divorce did not extend to the slightest sympathy to evangelical heresy, a

question on which he already had experience before the king's marriage was ever openly questioned. In 1526, he was one of those involved in the first serious hunt for Lutheran heretics in England, in the diocese of London, which unearthed a group of German merchants at the Steelyard who were in possession of heretical books. He was hunting heretics in his home diocese in the same year. In 1530, he was involved, under Archbishop Warham and Lord Chancellor More, in drawing up a list of proscribed errors and banned books.²⁹ Bell's connection to these early anti-Lutheran purges is significant. It tells us not merely that he was used to rounding up religious dissidents, but that he belonged to a particular tradition of heresy-hunting. As the work of Craig D'Alton has recently established, in the 1520s those heresy-hunters working under the supervision of Cuthbert Tunstall, the then bishop of London, were well aware of the many-headed nature of their quarry. They clearly distinguished between the old Lollard problem and the new evangelical, Lutheran problem as matters which were quite different in scale and urgency – even if the two breeds of heretics were alarmingly ready to exchange texts and ideas and to use one another's networks.³⁰

Bell and others of Tunstall's men were amongst the pioneers of anti-Lutheran work in England, but they were also the heirs of a well-established tradition of anti-Lollard campaigning. Lollardy had been driven out of the universities and out of most respectable social circles in the campaigns initiated by Archbishop Arundel in the early fifteenth century, but from about 1430 the pressure had let up. For whatever reason, anti-Lollard activity was at best intermittent for most of the rest of the fifteenth century. When the cause was taken up again by a new generation of reformist clerics in the early sixteenth century, Lollardy had become an established, niggling but minor part of the English ecclesiastical scene. From the bishops' point of view, Lollards were like fleas on a dog: an infestation which required bouts of intense activity when they became too bad, which was never going to be wiped out entirely, but which was never likely seriously to threaten the health of the patient. Or, to

change the analogy, Lollards played the same kind of political role for bishops that illegal immigrants do for some modern governments. D'Alton argues that any new episcopal regime which wanted to establish its credentials and ensure that it would be taken seriously – in particular, one that wished to stamp its authority onto its own clergy – would be well advised to begin by flexing its muscles against some heretics. Having some heretics to hunt was almost desirable for early Tudor bishops. Richard Mayhew, bishop of Hereford from 1503 to 1516, seems to have become more assiduous in his search for heretics the more he failed to find any evidence of serious heresy in his diocese. The most important and the most politicised heresy hunt of the pre-Reformation period, however, was that instigated in 1511 by William Warham, the archbishop of Canterbury.³¹ As D'Alton has shown, for Warham, heresy-hunting was simply one strand of a broader strategy to reinvigorate the diocese and indeed the province of Canterbury. Warham and his chancellor – none other than Cuthbert Tunstall – not only tried at least thirty heretics during the year 1511; they also visited twenty-two religious foundations in the diocese. Many of the staff they used were Warham's handpicked men, rather than long-standing diocesan officials, and that same clique went on during the following months to carry out a general visitation of the diocese. Warham's decision to begin with heresy trials was not so much because heresy seemed to him to be especially urgent, but because it was a dramatic way of starting a campaign for wider reform, and one which would not ruffle any powerful feathers. After this burst of activity, the heresy problem slid down the bishops' public agenda. It had not been solved, in the sense that heresy had not been exterminated, but that was an ambition which was neither attainable nor particularly important. Of course they disliked heresy, but they were not seriously afraid of it. The heresy-hunts were as important for their assertion of episcopal authority as for their direct effect on heresy itself.

A strikingly similar pattern appears in Bell's later efforts to stamp his authority on Worcester diocese when he took over in 1539. When he took office, Bell could have been forgiven for assuming he had full authority to undo his heretical predecessor's work. A matter of days before his election, the diocese had seen a very high-profile and, for Bell, satisfying recantation. The Scottish evangelical George Wishart had visited Bristol during the spring and had been accused – probably falsely – of preaching 'the moost blasphemous heresy that euer was herd, openly declaryng that Christ nother hath nor coulde merite for hym ne yett for vs'. His recantation was abject: two public sermons in the two Bristol churches he had originally preached in, bearing a faggot of wood, the traditional symbol of a penitent heretic. Local dignitaries had lined up to condemn him; the furious, anonymous letters sent to those dignitaries in Wishart's defence only underlined, by their impotent rage, the defeat of the evangelical cause. Sweetest of all, from Bell's point of view, this recantation had been ordered by the evangelical archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer.³² As a sign that Bell would face no political opposition, it was very hopeful. Evangelicals were despondent that the preacher-bishop Latimer had been replaced by a man who 'never preached that I hearde, excepte it were the Popes law'.³³

However, Bell was not immediately able to roll back his predecessor's changes. The apparent success of religious conservatism in the summer of 1539 was a false dawn. The Act of Six Articles was enacted but not enforced, and nationally the reformers' cause retained some political momentum. The dissolution of the monasteries was completed; evangelical printing continued to be permitted; and most significantly, the king's principal evangelical hatchet-man, Thomas Cromwell, remained in power and was even created earl of Essex.³⁴ Initially, Bell's progress was slow. The steward he had inherited from Latimer, John a Combe, even refused to allow the new bishop to see his court rolls and other muniments, forcing Bell to sue his own servant in order to gain access to these documents.³⁵ More

importantly, Bell was initially unable to pursue heresy at all, for during 1539-40 his jurisdiction was interdicted due to a vice-gerential visitation: Thomas Cromwell insisted on retaining direct authority over proceedings in the diocese, despite Bell's pleas to be allowed to police his own patch. Cromwell's visitation did produce some results which suited Bell. In particular, early in 1540, the Bells' old enemy Hugh Rawlings and another long-standing evangelical preacher, John Erley, were banished from the diocese for preaching against the Six Articles in Gloucester. However, Cromwell's agent saw this more as a matter of keeping the peace than of purging heresy. Having expelled the two men, he 'causyd dyuers of the worshippe of the towne to dringke to gether that dyd not dringke to gether this iij quarters of a yer', a forced reconciliation which would have been equally unwelcome to both sides of the divided town. One solitary heretic – John Dydson, the vicar of Coaley – was handed over to the bishop for trial.³⁶

This near-stalemate was dramatically resolved by Cromwell's sudden arrest and execution in the summer of 1540. This was not a simple conservative reaction, but it was certainly a change from the progressive Reformations of the 1530s, and it removed the restraining hand on those bishops who, like Bell, wished to attack the reformers. With his ally Thomas Bagarde, whom he had appointed as his vicar-general in 1539, Bell now embarked on a thorough drive against heresy; and it is here that his visitation book provides us with an unparalleled insight into the proceedings.

The first targets, unsurprisingly, were those who had publicly supported evangelical doctrine during the previous few years, including those whom Bell had been prevented from disciplining. One such was Humphrey Grynshall, a weaver from Stonehouse, south of Gloucester. On Sunday 18 April 1540, he had apparently been reading the Bible in Christchurch in Gloucester – which was his right, but which marked him out as a reformer. He did not, however, have any right to do what he did next: he publicly and loudly started

proclaiming his own doctrinal views. Having apparently completed his researches of the Scriptures to his satisfaction, he asserted that the doctrine of Purgatory and the practice of prayer for the dead had no basis in the Bible. 'And therefore he sayde that he wolde haue no prayers sayde for his sowle when so euer he shall dye, nor any other suffragies of the church.' He apparently made these comments before a considerable audience and, so his enemies alleged, 'a greate murmor grudge & vnquietnes' resulted. He was arrested and, in consequence of the interdict, initially brought not to the bishop, but to the then mayor of Gloucester, Robert Pole. At that stage, he stuck to his controversial views, but after Cromwell's fall Chancellor Bagarde was able to bring articles of heresy against him in the bishop's name.³⁷ Likewise, the case against John Dydson now proceeded: he was accused of preaching that prayers for the dead 'dyd wrange to christes blode' and of owning illegal books.³⁸

He was not the only cleric in Bell and Bagarde's sights. In June 1540, John Andrewes, the curate of Wotton-under-Edge, was charged with deprecating ceremonial and auricular confession.³⁹ Harry Costen was arrested over a sermon preached in All Saints' church in Gloucester on 8 August. Like Grynshall, he had deprecated prayer for the dead, but he had done so from the pulpit. That in itself might not have been enough to land him in trouble, but he added a little piece of theological deduction of his own: according to witnesses, he preached that 'all the workes that chryste dyd: cowde not saue hym: but by the feythe that he hade to hes fader'.⁴⁰ In September and October 1540, Bell issued injunctions to four of Latimer's appointees, all of whom had been licensed to preach. One of these was James Ashe, who had been accused of heresy as far back as 1536. All four of these men were instructed, in effect, to proclaim their loyalty to the new regime: they were to preach three sermons each in praise of the Act of Six Articles, in their own churches and in others chosen for them by their new bishop. For some of them Bell specified the texts or the subjects on

which they should preach. And these instructions at least were followed up. One of them formally certified his obedience: the other three, it seems likely, did so in person. Bell was sufficiently pleased with them that he re-licensed one of them, John Joseph, to preach, although there is no doubt that Joseph remained a committed evangelical.⁴¹

However, lay people began to be caught up in the sweep too, and here we meet differently flavoured material. Robert Jordeyn of Bristol was charged with statements which were apparently construed as heresy against the Mass.⁴² And most spectacularly, in April 1541 an entire nest of heretics from the rural Gloucestershire villages of Upleadon, Staunton and Hartbury was rounded up.⁴³ Bell heard the evidence himself, in Gloucester. A number of detailed and circumstantial charges were made against them. Central to these was that a group had gathered in various places – a mill at Upleadon and above a shop in Hartbury – and discussed heretical ideas. Their most vocal member, one Matthew Price (a Welsh name, intriguingly) was said by several witnesses to have denied transubstantiation, insisting that the ‘sacrament of thalter was not the bodye of Christ, but that it was bredde & wyne, and not made by god, but by mannes hande, for Christe toke his owne bodye w^t hym vp in to heven, and left it not behynde hym’. This offence apparently predated the Act of Six Articles, but it remained a graver heresy than any of which a cleric was accused. Price also deprecated ceremonial and auricular confession. Others in the group were accused of claiming that the Mass was ‘but a vayne glorye’ or of denouncing the traditional seven sacraments. The group as a whole was accused of deprecating mattins and evensong as mere ‘lyplabor’ which was of no value.

What happened to these suspected heretics is uncertain: the visitation book is silent on the matter. The likeliest outcome is that those arrested recanted their heresies and gave at least an outward show of conformity. It is most unlikely that anyone was actually executed as a result of this purge: executions were eye-catching events and there is a good chance that

one of the Protestant martyrologists would have heard about them had they happened. They knew of executions and cruel imprisonments in Worcester and Salisbury; it is not clear why similar events in Bristol or Gloucester should have been forgotten.⁴⁴ Moreover, similar cases were producing recantations across England. Henry VIII's reign was an age of recantation: even an enthusiast for martyrdom like John Foxe was forced to admit that in this earlier period, most of his heroes had recanted or conformed at some stage.⁴⁵ It is a point worth returning to.

What are we to make of these heretics? The detailed allegations recorded in Bell's visitation book records allow us to judge their beliefs in some detail. They fall fairly neatly into two groups, groups which overlap but are nevertheless distinct enough. The first group consists of undoubted evangelicals, influenced by novel German theologies – often, no doubt, mediated through Bishop Latimer. All of those whom can be placed unambiguously in this category are clergy. The four licenced preachers from whom Bell extracted promises of conformity were all evangelical protégés of the old bishop and some can be shown to have remained Protestants.⁴⁶ John Dydson and Harry Costen, who preached against prayer for the dead in the summer of 1540, unmistakably both did so from a standpoint informed by evangelical theology. The curate John Andrews disliked traditional ceremonies because they led Christians to place their faith in ceremonies rather than in God – a classic evangelical objection. It is not clear, however, if any of the lay people arrested belong in this clearly evangelical category. The only real possibility is the Stonehouse weaver Humphrey Grynshall, who publicly declared he could not find Purgatory in the Bible: but that emphasis on the text of the Bible means that his words bear another interpretation as well.

The second category, into which Grynshall may fall and the other lay people arrested much more clearly do, is dominated by Lollardy. The Upleadon-Staunton group positively defy any other label. This is not to say that they were unaware of their bishop's Reformation;

they were, no doubt, encouraged in their outspokenness by James Ashe, the evangelical parson of Staunton. However, their beliefs – robust denial of the Mass and ceremonial, with little positive put in its place – are classic late Lollardy. The bluntness of their language and actions are also much more characteristic of Lollards than of the more elegant and eloquent methods of proto-Protestant evangelicals. Compare how the curate John Andrews, and the Upleadon heretic Matthew Price, attacked the practice of confession to a priest. Andrews, the clergyman, said,

that he beleuyth in his lernynge & conscience that a synner beyng mynded to be confessed of his synne & cummyng to his goostly father to confesse the same is not bounde to declare & nowmbre his synnes in specie but that hit is sufficient for hym to confesse hym self generally that he is a synner, excepte hit be any grea theynge that grudgith his conscience wherin he wolde haue counsell.⁴⁷

That is, he was precise, balanced and longwinded. By contrast, Price, the rural layman, said simply ‘that hit was as goode to confesse hym to a tree, as to a *prist*’. The same bluntness is even plainer in an incident which took place in Upleadon church, when Price was with William Baker, another member of the group. Price

toke in his hande tholy water dassell sayinge to the saide william baker, remembre thy baptym, and thean & there the saide baker in contempte of the saide holywater turned his ars towardes the saide mathew, And the same mathew thean & there vilipendiously spryncled & cast holy water vpon the saide william Bakers ars.⁴⁸

The decisive proof that this group were Lollards, however, is their purported belief ‘that o^r sauyo^r Christ Ihus receaued not flesshe & blode of the virgyne marie, And that he was neuer fleshe & blode *presente* vpon the erthe’.⁴⁹ No evangelical would contemplate such an attack on the basic Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, but it was the sort of language into which

Lollards sometimes fell as a result of their loathing for the cult of the saints and for transubstantiation.

Robert Jordeyn, the Bristolian arrested in 1540, is more intriguing. He may have been a Lollard: or he may have been a simple scoffer and questioner. He was accused of meeting with three others in a cellar in Bristol, and saying in conversation that neither the Devil nor God could be seen 'w^t his bodyly yie', for they were spirits. The bishop's men apparently took this statement to be a denial of transubstantiation (through which God's body can be physically seen). However, Jordeyn does not seem to have intended his remarks as an attack on the Mass, more an interested observation. He also seems to have been rather more interested in the invisibility of the Devil than of God. Perhaps this was straightforward rationalism, idle speculation over ale; but Jordeyn also seems to have had some familiarity with the Bible, as Lollards did. That familiarity was limited, however, for his memory of the Old Testament was a little confused. In his attempt to prove that God cannot be seen, he tangled the story of Moses and the burning bush with the story of Moses receiving the tablets of the law on the mountain. So whether we class this man as a Lollard or a sceptic, or some hybrid between the two, is unclear: but there are no grounds for believing that he was an orthodox evangelical.

It appears, therefore, that when Bell and Bagarde set about rounding up heretics and dissidents within the diocese of Worcester, they found a fair few clergy who had clearly taken on Latimer's evangelical ideas, many of them his protégés. Perhaps Latimer's injunctions requiring all his clergy to study the Bible had had some effect. But beyond the clergy, reaching down into the parishes, Bell and Bagarde started to come across older patterns of dissidence, much more influenced by Lollardy than by the newly fashionable ideas from Germany.

One reading of this evidence, then, is that there were two parallel heretical movements: a learned, theologically aware evangelical movement dominated by the clergy, and a blunt, rationalistic and intellectually limited body of heresy informed by Lollardy and confined to the laity. Elsewhere – in London and Kent in particular – similar parallel movements can be discerned, although there evangelical ideas had apparently percolated further down the social scale, and had met and mingled with Lollardy.⁵⁰ Perhaps, then, Bell's visitation book is evidence that that process of percolation had scarcely begun in Worcester diocese. Evangelicalism had met local Lollardy, but may not yet have mingled with it, despite Latimer's best efforts during his four years in office. And indeed, there is very little evidence of any widespread lay evangelicalism in the diocese of Worcester in this period. A promising-looking clutch of wills from the Stow-on-the-Wold region from 1538 probably reveal clerical, rather than lay preoccupations: all make precisely the same, unusually-phrased claim that Christ had 'pasyfied the wrathe of hys father for mi fawtes'.⁵¹ On this reading, when Bell and Bagarde started seriously to look for evangelicals, they could find very few beyond the obvious clerical suspects. They were quickly reduced to scraping the heretical barrel for the dregs of Lollardy, rather than their prime evangelical targets. Bell's purge, perhaps, shows the limits of Latimer's achievement.

This cannot be the whole story, however. We know that there were lay people in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire who were unmistakably evangelical in this period, and whom Bell and Bagarde did not touch. Caroline Litzenberger's work on lay reformism in the county makes this eminently clear. There was a significant body of evangelical gentry in the county who were, it seems, beyond the bishop's reach. Not even Sir Nicholas Poyntz (who was on record as receiving books from the heretical vicar of Coaley), nor Latimer's henchman Richard Tracy, were troubled by Bell. Indeed, even shepherds were reading the English New Testament in 1540s Gloucestershire.⁵² An alternative explanation is that Bell

uncovered this pattern of reformism because this was what he was looking for. His experience from the 1520s would have prepared him to find evangelicals who would be (to a degree) learned; who would be drawn chiefly from the clergy; and who could be dealt with gently. Their errors were severe but the full rigour of the law was not called for. Instead, Bell seems to have been content with the more conciliatory approach which Tunstall pioneered and which D'Alton has called 'reformation by the fireside': that is, trying to persuade heretical clergy of their errors with no more than veiled threats.⁵³ It may have been such softly-spoken techniques which helped induce Latimer's licenced preachers to conform.

Alongside these evangelical clergy who deserved gentle handling, Bell's experience in the 1520s would have taught him to look for Lollards from lower down the social scale: a distinct group who should be handled distinctively. Firmer methods were used against them. One of the Upleadon group claimed that he would have given 20 shillings if he could have avoided being forced to give evidence against his comrades. But give evidence he did, as did most of the others, betraying one another. This is another typical Lollard characteristic which a heresy-hunter with Bell's experience would have expected to find. Lollards were particularly ready to wilt under the heat of persecution. Anne Hudson reckons that of a typical fifty Lollards arrested forty-nine would recant their beliefs rather than face execution for them.⁵⁴ So the evangelical clergy could be cajoled, and the Lollard laity bullied, into conformity.

However, the powerful lay people who were the mainstay of evangelical heresy in Gloucestershire were bypassed. Bell was no fool, and he was no doubt well aware that such people would not be so easily cowed. However, it would probably be a mistake to suppose that his anti-heresy purge was actually intended to stamp out heresy. It was certainly intended to control heresy – to keep it down to manageable levels like a parasitic infection, and to keep it behind closed doors. But, like the classic heresy-hunts of the 1510s and 1520s which he

seems to have been emulating, this was also about asserting his authority over his diocese, particularly over his clergy. It was a show of strength in a diocese which had been allowed to become ill-disciplined, from a new bishop who needed to assert his authority. As the heresy cases ran out, Bell moved on to deal with more intractable issues. Clerical discipline was one: he dealt with an embarrassing case from Stratford-upon-Avon in which a priest at the collegiate church there was found to have been keeping a mistress on the college's premises. Bell had himself been supplanted as warden of that college by one of Latimer's men, and was now reasserting his authority.⁵⁵ Another issue was the physical state of church buildings in the diocese: in March 1541 Bell successfully extracted a promise of financial assistance on this point from the Court of Augmentations in London.⁵⁶

Like Warham in Canterbury thirty years before, Bell seems to have seen an anti-heresy drive as a prelude for a general reassertion of order in his diocese. As with Warham, this seems to have run into the sand disappointingly quickly. In August 1541, the creation of the new diocese of Gloucester drastically curtailed Bell's power. In January 1542, the dissolved cathedral priory at Worcester was refounded as a secular cathedral, with the old prior, Henry Holbeach, as the new dean; Holbeach was an evangelical associate of Latimer's, and pursued a reforming and iconoclastic programme in Worcester until he was made bishop of Rochester in April 1544. Ironically, he filled the vacancy on the episcopal bench which had been created by Bell's own retirement.⁵⁷

Bell's approach to the heresy problem was not one which recommended itself to his fellow bishops. In July 1540, there was an attempt at a full-scale heresy purge in London, an attempt which backfired badly: there were now simply too many heretics in London for the prisons to hold.⁵⁸ Heresy was no longer an annoying but controllable parasite; it had become a cancer that threatened to eat away at the bones of Catholic society. From this time onwards, the pursuit of religious dissidents in England would be targeted at its leaders and teachers, for

in a country that was beginning to be divided by religion the wider constituencies of dissent simply could not be controlled by the means available to the early modern state. Neither the hunters nor the hunted would be nearly so willing to compromise; Lollardy, as a distinctive and distinctively timorous religious identity, was well on the way to disappearing. Bell was using the methods of an age that had passed against a problem whose nature was changing and which would continue to change. Some of those he sought out and arrested were, perhaps, England's last medieval heretics: his anachronistic and failed purge against them was England's last medieval heresy hunt.

¹ James Gairdner and J. H. Brodie (ed.), *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, 21 vols (London 1862-1932) [hereafter *LP*], XIV (ii), no. 113(2).

² National Archives, Kew [hereafter NA], E 135 / 17 / 21 (*LP*, XVIII (ii), no. 396).

³ K. G. Powell, 'The Beginnings of Protestantism in Gloucestershire' in *Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society (Transactions)*, XC (1971), 141-57; Caroline Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity: Gloucestershire 1540-1580* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. 39-41. See also the valuable treatment of some of this material in Susan Wabuda, 'The provision of preaching during the early English Reformation: with special reference to itineration, c. 1530 to 1547' (University of Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 1991), 99-114.

⁴ Following much recent usage, I here use *evangelical* to describe those who would once have been called *Protestants* in the early Reformation: an appropriately uneasy term for a body of people whose beliefs were more fluid and ill-defined than the party label 'Protestants' suggests. See Alec Ryrie, *The Gospel and Henry VIII: Evangelicals in the Early English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003), xv-xvi.

⁵ On early Bristol reformers, see Martha C. Skeeters, *Community and Clergy: Bristol and the Reformation c. 1530 - c. 1570* (Oxford, 1993).

⁶ John Craig and Caroline Litzenberger, 'Wills as Religious Propaganda: the Testament of William Tracy', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XLIV (1993), 422-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*; 'Richard Tracy' in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004) [hereafter *ODNB*].

⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven and London, 1996), 114. Latimer's visit to Bristol is narrated in Skeeters, *Community and Clergy*, 38-44.

⁹ Devon Record Office, ECA Book 51 fo. 342^{r-v}.

¹⁰ Walter Frere and William Kennedy, *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the period of the Reformation*, 3 vols (Alcuin Club Collections 14-16, London 1910), II, 15-17.

¹¹ *LP*, XII (i), no. 539(3); XII (ii), nos 530, 534.

¹² NA, SP 1 / 142 fo. 42^v, SP 1 / 153 fo. 60^f, SP 1 / 157 fo. 155^f (*LP*, XIV (i), no 55; XIV (ii), no. 79; XV, no. 183); *LP*, XIV (ii), no. 728.2; XIX (ii), no. 527(12); Wabuda, 'Provision of preaching', 105.

¹³ NA, SP 1 / 150 fo. 178^v (*LP*, XIV (i), no. 828); *LP*, XIII (ii), no. 710; XVII, no. 8; Litzenberger, *English Reformation and the Laity*, 34-5; Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics in the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2002), 162-96; Peter Marshall, 'The Rood of Boxley, the Blood of Hailes and the Defence of the Henrician Church', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XLVI (1995), 689-696; Hugh Latimer, *Sermons and Remains of Hugh Latimer*, ed. G. E. Corrie (Cambridge, 1845), 415.

¹⁴ Ryrie, *Gospel and Henry VIII*, 23-39.

¹⁵ NA, SP 1 / 152 fo. 19^r (*LP*, XIV (i), no. 1065).

¹⁶ NA, SP 1 / 152 fo. 143 (LP, XIV (i), no. 1217); Muriel St. Clare Byrne (ed.), *The Lisle Letters*, 6 vols (Chicago, 1981), V, 577 (where confused with Latimer); British Library, Cottonian MS Cleopatra E.iv fo. 65^r; Charles Wriothesley, *A Chronicle of England During the Reigns of the Tudors*, ed. William D. Hamilton, vol. I (Camden Society n. s. XI, 1875), 103.

¹⁷ John Foxe, *Actes and monuments of matters most speciall in the church* (London, 1583), 1739; Byrne, *Lisle Letters*, V, 573; Wriothesley, *Chronicle*, 103; Hastings Robinson (ed.), *Original Letters Relative to the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 1846), 617.

¹⁸ The survey in John A. F. Thomson, *The Later Lollards* (Oxford, 1965), 20-51, remains useful.

¹⁹ A case argued vigorously and tendentiously in Donald Dean Smeeton, *Lollard Themes in the Reformation Theology of William Tyndale* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1986).

²⁰ Andrew Larsen, 'Are All Lollards Lollards?' in Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Haven and Derrick G. Pitard (eds), *Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2003), 59-72.

²¹ Craig and Litzenberger, 'Wills as Religious Propaganda', 421.

²² NA, E 36 / 120 fo. 69^v (LP, XII (ii), no. 530).

²³ ODNB.

²⁴ Wabuda, 'Provision of preaching', 99-102, 113.

²⁵ NA, SP 1 / 104 fos. 93^r, 147^r (LP, X, no. 1027, 1099); the Ashe case is discussed in G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: the Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972), 35-6.

²⁶ NA, SP 1 / 115 fos. 164^r, 165^r, SP 1 / 117 fo. 257^r (LP, XII (i), nos. 308, 831).

²⁷ Elton, *Policy and Police*, 121-2; Litzenberger, *English Reformation and the Laity*, 36.

²⁸ *LP*, IV, no. 6308; V, no. 686; VI, no. 317, 661; *ODNB*.

²⁹ *LP*, IV, nos 1962, 2073, 6402; *ODNB*.

³⁰ Craig D'Alton, 'Cuthbert Tunstal and heresy in Essex and London, 1528' in *Albion*, XXXV (2003), 210-28.

³¹ Craig D'Alton, 'William Warham, John Colet and the Lollards of Kent, 1511-12' in Ian Hunter, John Christian Laursen, and Cary J. Nederman (eds), *Heresy in Transition: Transforming Ideas of Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, 2005).

³² *ODNB*; Robert Ricart, *The Maire of Bristowe Is Kalendar*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (Camden Society n.s. V, 1872), 55; British Library, Cottonian MS Cleopatra E.v fos. 390-1 (*LP*, XIV (i), no. 184); NA, SP 1 / 152 fo. 61^r (*LP*, XIV (i), no. 1095); Skeeters, *Community and Clergy*, 51-5. The claim that Wishart had preached Anabaptist doctrines is convincingly refuted in Martin Dotterweich, 'The emergence of evangelical theology in Scotland to 1550' (University of Edinburgh PhD thesis, 2002), 272-6.

³³ 'A Memorial from George Constantine to Thomas Lord Cromwell' in *Archaeologia*, XXIII (1831), 59.

³⁴ Ryrie, *Gospel and Henry VIII*, 20-2.

³⁵ NA, C 1 / 951 / 15-16.

³⁶ NA, SP 1 / 157 fo. 155^{r-v}, SP 1 / 158 fo. 114^r (*LP*, XV, nos. 183, 406); Elton, *Policy and Police*, 122-3.

³⁷ Worcestershire County Record Office MS BA 2764 / 802 [hereafter *Visitation Book*], 137.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 128-9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 145-8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 151-9; Wabuda, 'Provision of preaching', 113-14. On Joseph's later career, see Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989), 399, 426, 450-1.

⁴² *Visitation Book*, 117.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 107-10, 115, 171-2. Cf. the discussion of this group in Ryrie, *Gospel and Henry VIII*, 229.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Foxe, *Actes and monuments*, 1202; John Gough Nichols (ed.), *Narratives of the Days of the Reformation* (Camden Society o. s. LXXVII, 1859), 60-8.

⁴⁵ Ryrie, *Gospel and Henry VIII*, 69-89.

⁴⁶ In addition to John Joseph and James Ashe (on whom see above), those disciplined were Edward Large (whose history of inflammatory evangelical preaching is detailed in Elton, *Policy and Police*, 375-80) and William Benet, a former chaplain to Latimer who, in Gloucester in May 1536, had preached that 'if the purgatory prestes do pray w^t their tonges till their tonges be worne to stompes yet their prayers shall not helpe ne prevayle the sowles departed'. NA, SP 1 / 104 fo. 147^r (LP, X, no. 1099).

⁴⁷ *Visitation Book*, 131.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 109, 172.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁰ Ryrie, *Gospel and Henry VIII*, 223-47.

⁵¹ Worcestershire County Record Office, Wills 1538 / 28, 1538 / 47, 1538 / 260-2; cf. Litzenberger, *English Reformation and the Laity*, 41-2.

⁵² Litzenberger, *English Reformation and the Laity*, 43; *Visitation Book*, 129; William Camden, *Annales rerum Anglicarum et Hibernicarum regnante Elizabetha*, 3 vols (1717), I, xxix-xxx.

⁵³ Craig D'Alton, 'The suppression of Lutheran heretics in England, 1526-29', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, LIV (2003), 228-253; D'Alton, 'Charity or fire? The argument of Thomas More's 1529 *Dyaloge*' in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXXIII (2002), 51-70.

⁵⁴ Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford, 1988), 158-62.

⁵⁵ *Visitation Book*, 111-12; Latimer, *Sermons and Remains*, 383-4.

⁵⁶ *LP*, XVI, no. 648.

⁵⁷ *ODNB*; *LP*, XVI, no. 1226(2); XVII, no. 71(28); MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, 289.

⁵⁸ Ryrie, *Gospel and Henry VIII*, 17-19, 40-1.